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ABSTRACT

The issue of community control concerns the future role of parents in a changing school environment. It is vital that parental involvement be channeled toward positive and realistic goals such as defining the needs of children and determining how to meet these needs. To give parents access to decisionmakers, school boards should consider holding at least half their meetings in neighborhood schools where parents can see their board members and speak on the issues. Some form of community councils are necessary where educators, parents, and students can communicate without rancor and recrimination. (Author)

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COMMUNITY CONTROL AT THE CROSSROADS*

An Address by Herman R. Goldberg
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Having just spent eight years on the firing line myself--as Superintendent of Schools in Rochester, N.Y.--I welcome this opportunity to talk to members of this association from a new perspective, as associate commissioner-designate for elementary and secondary education in Washington.

For some reason my new quarters in the Office of Education do not come equipped with a computer already programmed to give me instant wisdom as a national spokesman. So I come with no ready solutions to the complex educational problems you face every day at the State and local levels. This is just as well. Those of us who have been in the trenches know there are no simple solutions to such problems as school integration, the quest for a better educational product, the need for a responsive and responsible role for parents in the decision-making process about which way we should be heading.

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Not to mention the ever-present dilemma: "Where's the money coming from?"

It is one thing to stand on the mountaintop, above the fray, and say we must have sweeping changes in American education. Certainly we need these voices, raised sometimes in indignation, but more often in genuine concern. We need the thinkers and planners who can take the long view, who can look down the road and tell us where we ought to be a decade, two decades, hence. But you and I know that it will be up to the school administrators to design the detailed road maps that will get us there a mile or two at a time. We also know that every school district is going to need a different map.

So I can assure you that in my new role as associate commissioner I may go up the mountain, but I will not forget where I have been.

With that in mind, I would like to share with you some thoughts about an issue that has engaged my attention as a local administrator and will continue to do so on the national scene. That issue is community control or participation or involvement. By whatever name, it concerns the future role of parents in a changing school environment.

What are the areas in which parents can and should be involved in the educational planning process?

In the implementation of educational programs? In the redirection of existing enterprises?

As we move toward integrating the schools, will parents feel the same commitment to the school across town that they felt toward the school down the block? Will they continue to be involved if it means inter-racial involvement? Have the early attempts at community control convinced parents that this is the only way to get a quality education for their children? Or do they feel the dreams they dream for their children are simply beyond the scope of present school structure under anybody's administration?

On these and similar issues, I think community control has reached a crossroads. It could go either way.

A colleague of mine tells a personal story that fits into this context. As a small boy he remembers walking down a lonely road in Wyoming with his grand-father. They came to a fork in the road where signs to Cheyenne pointed in both directions. A stranger approached. "Does it matter which road I take to Cheyenne?" the stranger asked. The grandfather poked at the ground with a stick for a moment, then looked up. "Not to me it don't," he said.

While a not-to-me-it-don't attitude on the part of parents may have been prevalent in the past, it no longer holds true. We have gotten past the semantics

about the need for a quality education available to every child, and we are down to the realities about how and when it can be done.

I think minority groups, and the general public, are closer to seeing school integration as the most feasible--and cost-effective way--to get at what we are all after. Certainly, compensatory education programs are still needed, particularly in the inner city schools of our largest cities where a socio-economic mix of children simply cannot be achieved short of new arrangements with suburban school districts. Certainly, compensatory education programs will be needed for the foreseeable future on the Indian reservations where integrating the elementary schools would require children riding up to 100 miles a day. The point is that for the majority of children who need special help our programs in compensatory education are stopgap measures, and costly ones at that.

Speaking of busing, permit me an aside that does bear on the subject. Before I left Rochester I was given a farewell dinner, and toward the end of the evening I received several gifts, one of which I especially enjoyed. In a box that carried the seal of approval of Good Housekeeping and Parents Magazine was a yellow toy school bus. The accompanying poem read: "Never forget that God-given line, A bus for yours, a chauffeur for mine."

In Rochester, incidentally, the desegregation plan recently approved by the school board calls for almost no busing of younger children. Over 90 percent of the primary children and 70 percent of the intermediate grade children walk to school.

Nationwide, we have made more progress toward real school desegregation in the last two years than at any time since the original Supreme Court decision 17 years ago. Integrated education is the right road, the democratic road, and in the end the least costly one. As administrators who must make it happen, we need to stick in there despite the detours, the tunnels, and the blind spots. It is a matter of keeping our heads cool, our eyes on the road, and our bright lights on.

I think leaders of minority groups are beginning to see results that political leaders, educators, and the courts have been promising for a long time. But it is interesting that the seeming slowness of the integration process led to a whole new movement among minority parents--the demand for decentralization of school authority and community control.

Parents just got tired of waiting for Godot. At issue was a better education for children in school now, children who represent yet another generation trying to learn under the same conditions their parents had known--crowded classrooms, outdated physical plants,

irrelevant curriculum, unmotivated teaching and all the rest of it. Parents in effect were saying: "You did this to me. But not mine."

You and I have wrestled with these problems for a long time. We know how many new schools are needed; we know money will stretch so far and no farther. We know some courses seem irrelevant; we also know when they are educationally sound. We know that teaching is not always the best; we also know that creativity and high motivation are rare commodities in any field, education included. We are the professionals who are trained and paid to provide America with the best possible educational product, given time, money, and talent.

Can parents hope to achieve what we educators cannot?

To some extent I think they can.

When you stop to think about it, the fact that parents care enough, are distrubed enough about what's happening to their children, to get involved personally in the educational process is a new phenomenon in this country. And it is one of the most encouraging developments to come along. We need to nurture and support it in every way we can--in the home and in the school. It is vital, however, that this energy and concern be channeled toward positive and realistic goals.

The place to start is in the home. Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Elliot Richardson states the proposition this way: "Should not educators try

harder to increase the number of homes that encourage learning as the next big effort to help break the cycle of poverty through educational means? Perhaps our slogan for the 1970's should be: Each living room a school room."

How to train parents to work with their children on educational skills at home--how to develop a home environment in which education is respected, even revered--should have a high priority in developing the improved educational programs that parents demand. Many school districts have not yet worked this component into the package. I think they should.

As for decentralization and community control, I think our experiences to date show we had better not start the ball game until we have a rule book. One of the basic problems has been that there is confusion as to where the authority of community groups begins and ends. What they can do and cannot do has not been adequately spelled out. Because they lack control of the budget, community groups often tend to get mired in the smaller issues and delay addressing the more profound issues. And, of course, there are the power struggles and uncertainities that accompany most new excursions into uncharted territory.

As we move increasingly into an integrated situation, as parents from different ethnic and income

groups press harder for a voice in educational planning--and I think they will--it is very important that we give them a chance to help write the rule book.

We need to involve parents, first, in defining the needs of their children and in determining how to do the job to meet these needs. For example, to what extent do parents demand changes in reading techniques to raise pupil achievement scores? To what extent do they want career programs that will qualify their sons and daughters for jobs in the real world? To what degree do they want a more acceptable academic sequence leading to further education?

Second, goals need to be squared with reality. Parents should be made aware of what is reasonable from a cost standpoint, what is academically sound, what has already been tried with what results.

Third, parents need to know where they fit in, where community control does indeed begin and end. This is a tough one. It gets us into the whole area of budget and finance; staff employment, placement, transfer and termination; curriculum selection; and so on. But it is an issue we are going to have to face soon and it will have to be face-to-face.

For openers, I suggest that school boards put their show on the road. Much of the demand for community control is generated by the fact that to

most parents the school board is a nebulous group of blank faces housed downtown somewhere, remote from the problems that disturb parents in the classrooms in their neighborhoods. Parents need access to the people who make the real policy decisions in education.

I recommend that school boards consider holding at least half of their meetings in neighborhood schools where parents can see their board members and speak to the vital agenda issues. If these meetings accomplished nothing else, they would show residents that school board members are real people, with real competencies, and real concern for children. This kind of face-to-face meeting--in some cases confrontation might be a better word--would probably be good for board members as well. Because boards are struggling these days with desegregation plans, attendance zones, budget priorities, and a host of other problems, it is easy to be caught in unintentional dehumanizing of the process. This is not the case if you are sitting across a table in a high school auditorium from constituent Harry Porter whose son is a potential dropout and drug addict.

Schoolmen, like others concerned with inner city education, tend to bristle when they hear themselves called a "racist" or a "bigot." These are what I call "trigger words." They are often used by critics who are really criticizing our failure to provide immediate solutions to the crucial problems.

I can identify at least six stages on a scale that culminates in true racism. I think it would be profitable as we work with minority groups in the community to examine our own innermost thoughts to see if we belong anywhere on this continuum:

1. Insensitivity. This implies total lack of knowledge about the unique problems, and hang-ups, minorities encounter throughout life because of skin pigmentation.

2. Indifference. This means knowledge of minority problems but little concern about them.

3. Paternalism. This says we care, as a patron would, in a condescending way.

4. Bias. This implies that there really are differences in intellect and attitudes among people of different races.

5. Prejudice.

6. Racism.

The last two stages speak for themselves.

If board meetings can become open forums for parents, I think the students themselves should have the same right. As we all know, what we want for our children these days seems to bear little resemblance to what they want for themselves. Let's give the kids a chance to speak out where it counts.

Going a step farther, I would like to see fuller development of mechanisms for dialogue among all three groups--administrators, parents, and students--

some way to merge or at least accommodate their varying concerns and aspirations. Perhaps we could establish groups that are widely representative and call them Common Aspiration Councils. Whatever we call them, however we organize them, we urgently need some form of community councils where educators and parents and students can communicate without rancor and recrimination. Let's talk to each other before our interests and actions are polarized.

Earlier I said that I believe community control stands at a crossroads, and that I thought it could go either way. There may be an increasing demand by parents for control if their frustrations with the system continue to mount. On the other hand, their demands may gradually taper as they see school boards and administrators moving to make positive changes with reasonable speed.

Which road the community involvement movement ultimately takes is largely up to you, as school administrators, and your boards. It depends upon your responsiveness to their legitimate concerns, your willingness to keep an open mind on the fundamental issues, your determination to initiate change when change is needed. Believe me, parents are going to get to Cheyenne by one road or the other. And there is one response administrators had better not convey: "It don't matter to me."

Someone once said that a statesman is a politician who is held up straight by the pressures from all sides.

You are going to have to be politicians in the finest sense of the word, responsive to the demands of an aroused clientele that knows what it wants and is increasingly determined to get it. You are going to be caught in more cross-fires than you can count.

I can assure you that you will end up as statesmen who can handle any peace-keeping assignment in the world. But the rewards will be greater even than that. For you will be participating in the design and implementation of an educational product that will give millions of youngsters a fighting chance with life.